



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

Angels and Prophets

by Franz Rigert

In a rousing and prophetic sermon marking the 175th Anniversary of First Congregational UCC in Janesville last Sunday, the Rev. Tanya Sadagopan raised an intriguing rhetorical question – “What is the difference between angels and prophets? And, which would you rather be?” After a brief pause, she offered, “Yeah, me too!”

You see angels appear out of nowhere, bringing good news and glad tidings, and then – poof – they disappear! Remember the reassuring words the angel Gabriel brought to Zechariah and then to Mary? Who can forget the “angel of the Lord” delivering great joy to shepherds in the fields? Most of us would probably prefer to be the voice of hope for those who stand in fear, the spiritual guide for those who are lost and broken. Who wouldn’t want to make such a profound impact in just a few fleeting moments?

Many of us marvel in the “angelic” visits we have experienced in our own lives – less the celestial winged type and more the “divine sign in human form” that brings calm and clarity. On one particular day in my early 20’s, I remember the voice of a stranger who – after boldly delving into my personal life and spiritual space – ended up nudging me toward seminary against my inclination to enroll in law school. Consider the moments in your life when you experienced a sacred encounter. Imagine the times you may have touched another life, perhaps in a transformational way . . . and you never knew it! The ministry of earthly angels is a beautiful expression of God’s love and grace – an extraordinary gift through ordinary means. Perhaps this is why so many of us love the season of Advent. It’s a special time for practicing random acts of kindness. Oh, to be an angel!

Prophets, on the other hand, tend to bring agitation through a spirit of tenacity that never goes away! Think about them – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Miriam, Micah, Deborah, Amos, Jesus, Harriet, Gandhi, Martin, Greta – they show up more often in times of comfort and ease, disrupting our complacency and contentment. They regularly barge into our busy lives and remind us of all the injustices, bigotries and greed that render humanity broken and creation fragile. It’s hard to take up the prophetic role because so often such God talk is neither welcomed nor tolerated. But the scriptures implore us to pursue a *just world for all* through both advocacy and action.

Our tradition, in particular, understands there is no such thing as proclaiming love without practicing justice. So long as some of God's people are left marginalized, all of God's people cannot be whole. So long as some of God's people suffer for lack of food, shelter, medicine and education, none of God's people can claim this world to be equitable. Prophets bring us to our knees. They tell truths we don't want to hear. They shake us to our core and draw forth confessions and convictions that prompt us to change. Yet, perhaps this is why, deep within us, we yearn for a season of spiritual introspection. We long for a time of repentance and renewal.

So I find myself pondering the dance between our two liturgical seasons of spiritual preparation – Advent and Lent. They complement each other beautifully, even as they call us to contrasting experiences. Several years ago the Church added a fifth liturgical color, differentiating Advent with a deep and hopeful hue of blue, from the more reflectively and confessional Lenten color of purple.

I believe Advent and Lent go together like angels and prophets. They bring unexpected blessings and unrelenting demands. They announce the incarnation of love and the manifestation of justice. They tell an ancient story of Jesus coming in and Jesus going out.

Friends, as we near Ash Wednesday I wish you a holy and reflective season. Over the coming 40 days, I pray that your faith will be deepened through surprising moments of grace and fresh encounters with the living God. Let us, with glad and grateful hearts, set forth to be *angels and prophets* for the good of this world!

Blessings in the love of Jesus,

Franz